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Editorial

IS AN EFFECTIVE SOCIAL PREACHING POSSIBLE?

The obligation of social morality and the insufficiency of mere personal morality is universally felt in the church today. The pulpit is keenly alive to the necessity of preaching a larger righteousness than that which has contented many a man who has supposed himself to be a Christian. Even preachers whose message of salvation is most individualistic have felt that they must insist that a redeemed man shall live the life of helpfulness and honor in all his relations, domestic, industrial, political.

But effective social preaching is by no means easy. Many a good man who would fain apply his gospel to the crying evils of our complex modern life finds himself confronted with the difficulty of providing a remedy. He is not a sociological expert. He has a wholesome recognition of his own limitations and a sensible objection to talking nonsense. He therefore comes to the conclusion that it is quite useless for him to become the propagandist of any particular social doctrine. He concludes that specific social preaching is none of his business, and confines himself to the gospel of divine love which has the power to beget all human love. He makes up his mind that he will preach this supreme principle, and tell his people that love is the solvent of all human ills.

And this is a comfortable doctrine. The preacher speaks at once to employers and workmen, to rich and poor, and tells them that if every man would love his brother there would be no more strife. Competitive business would become as simple as family co-operation, for "love doeth no harm to his neighbor." And all

of the congregation accept the good word without a murmur. Some of them feel that the pulpit is engaged in its proper business of talking religious platitudes. Others, more wistful for the better day, accept the message as a far-off hope and believe that sometime things will be better. And all of them go back to the ways of common life without change of attitude or practice.

The preacher thinks he is preaching a social message because he talks of sweat-shops and wages and what not, but his preaching is ineffective because he has forgotten that love cannot solve scientific questions. Love can undoubtedly create the true spirit for a fruitful inquiry, but love cannot decide whether seven, or eight, or nine, or ten hours is a day's work. Love cannot tell whether two dollars or three dollars is a proper pay for a certain piece of work. Love cannot guide a man very far in the matter of the amount of profit that he should derive from a transaction. Love cannot settle whether the maid servant should have two afternoons to herself each week. Infinitely effective in individual relations, determining the attitude of a man toward an unfortunate debtor or toward a sick employee, in wider relations love is satisfied to supply a motive, and leaves to earnest science the task of determining economic conditions in accordance with which human business is possible.

Our able preachers are keenly sensible that the generalities of the pulpit have not helped men in their search for social salvation. They feel that the church ought to have a burning word to fire men's souls to specific duty. It is a shame that flagrant evils should exist among us which Christian men might end. It is tragic that men should enjoy the ministrations of the church and imagine themselves the friends of God when they are doing nothing for God's downtrodden and afflicted children. And the virile preacher has said, Go to now, it is not of abstract love that I will speak, but of the things that are immediate and pressing. I will show men their duty about wages, and ventilation, and hours; about children's milk, and the price of meat, and the distribution of ice. When, therefore, the newspapers announce on Thursday morning a strike of employees, the minister feels that he has a specific duty in the matter. To be sure, he has pressing engagements on hand that

will occupy many hours, but a deliverance on the subject will be expected from him on Sunday. He has no exact knowledge of the circumstances; he has no expert ability to discuss the question; he has no means of examining witnesses; he has no access to first-hand information. He must pick up what facts he can; he must illuminate them by his own sympathy with the oppressed; he must interpret them in the light of his own sense of human brotherhood; and then he must tell his congregation the duty of all parties concerned. He will inevitably make many misstatements, which will be immediately detected by one or the other side in the dispute. He will probably take the part of neither unequivocally, and so nobody will be satisfied with his solution. In the heat of the disagreement neither of the combatants cares for anything but thorough-going indorsement. The hour of worship becomes a divisive partisanship to the loss of everybody. A few people are glad because the pulpit is fearless, many are interested to see the minister "sail in," most people disregard the whole matter as inconsequential.

As a matter of fact, there would be no gain but rather loss if it were possible for the ministry to solve men's problems for them, and tell them exactly what to do. We have obtained our spiritual freedom from a priesthood that would dictate individual morality—a task fairly possible to the right type of man; we shall certainly not put ourselves in bondage to a new priesthood, that shall give definite instructions on disputed matters of social duty. It is not in that direction that leadership can be found.

If then social preaching be ineffective when it is general, because it is thereby insignificant, and ineffective when it is specific, because it is inevitably unintelligent, is it possible to present a virile social message from the pulpit? It is possible to produce a profound conviction of sin upon the matter of social conditions, because they are so sad and so bad, whoever may be immediately to blame. It is possible that we may all be brought to feel that we have a common responsibility for the economic order. The very inability of the pulpit to point out definite remedy is itself a striking evidence that our common ignorance is our shame. And then the minister may hurl back at his people the challenge that it is for them to find out

the way of relief. The highest duty today is unselfish investigation of all conditions with a view to their amelioration. The supreme desideratum is a passionate desire in all classes to right all wrongs at any cost. The most evident wickedness of our conquering century is that we are overcoming all obstacles except those which prevent our living and working together to a common advantage; that we are reducing waste everywhere else, but are so powerless in the presence of the waste of youth and hope and the life of the human spirit. It is intelligent, scientific, and always utterly unselfish study of the conditions that is most needed, and to that the pulpit may incite men. The church shall then be a place where men feel profoundly their duty in the sight of God to discern the ills of our human society, where they pray together for the wisdom and unselfishness to discover the causes and to find the remedies, and where they highly resolve that they will undertake the task. So would worship itself be deepened and glorified.

The pulpit preaches an effective social message as it incites a longing for righteousness that is greater than the longing for success, as it insists upon the duty of complete knowledge of all conditions and the shame of neglect, as it encourages men to believe that the results of their efforts after righteousness shall be more and more fruitful, as it holds up, not a far-off utopia, but an accessible American community to be studied and bettered, and particularly as it ever insists that religion does not offer as alternatives righteousness, or benevolence, or piety, but unites them in a great demand to do justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.